

Statement of Congressman Ben Ray Luján
Hearing on “An Examination of Federal Mental Health Parity Laws and Regulations”
September 9, 2016

The Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act was a signature achievement of New Mexico’s longest sitting Senator, Pete Domenici. It was through his perseverance and that of Senator Ted Kennedy and Representatives Ramstad and Patrick Kennedy that Congress finally passed The Parity Act.

But it was just a first step. I thank my colleague and friend, Congressman Joe Kennedy, for his efforts to build on his family’s legacy and I look forward to working together to secure passage of more robust legislation that expands coverage for some of our most vulnerable citizens.

As we all know, parity laws are undoubtedly a crucial step, but laws mean very little without access to mental health service providers and mental health facilities.

In my state, we do not have a functioning mental and behavioral health system. When the State of New Mexico decided to unnecessarily suspend payments to 15 behavioral health providers claiming fraud, the system was thrown into chaos. Now, even though every provider has been exonerated of the charges leveled against them, the damage has been done –providers have been forced to close their doors and continuity of care has been disrupted for vulnerable New Mexicans.

I hope today’s hearing will bring light to the many challenges faced by our mental health system and will serve to educate all of my colleagues on the importance of strengthening mental health parity laws and expanding access. Everyone deserves to live their healthiest lives, and mental health is no exception.

This should not be a partisan issue – it is simply the right thing to do.